

# The Role of Inflectional Affixes in Boosting Students' Grammar Skills: A Review

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## ABSTRACT

English stands out as the most widely used language globally, yet for learners like Libyans, it remains a foreign language, often leading to significant mistakes, particularly in word formation and morphology. There is a dearth of research regarding the inflectional affixes to improve students' grammar skills. Numerous word formation and morphology studies of students writing in the literature study. This research decisively reviews and focuses on inflectional affixes, which play a critical role in the English language. This proactive approach enhances fluency and precision in speech and writing. Inflectional suffixes are crucial as they convey precise meanings and grammatical nuances, allowing individuals to express tense, number, gender, and other distinctions effectively. Several articles were collected from the Google Scholar database. A content analysis approach was conducted to understand the inflection issue. The findings indicate that the formation of past tense and past participles adheres to predictable patterns in regular verbs, while irregular verbs present complexities, particularly for language learners. Overall, mastering inflectional suffixes empowers learners to use language precisely and creatively, enhancing their communication abilities, and demands a solid understanding of the grammatical rules that govern their application. Learners actively engage with inflectional suffixes through targeted exercises and real-life contexts, significantly enhancing their ability to identify and apply these forms. Innovative teaching strategies, such as immersive communicative techniques, and games help learners apply inflected forms in practical contexts.

**Keywords:** Difficulties, EFL, grammar skills, inflectional suffixes, past tense, past participle

## INTRODUCTION

Inflectional suffixes are essential for understanding language, especially for elementary students. They help learners grasp the connections between words, improving reading and listening comprehension by revealing how words change to convey different meanings and functions. This foundational knowledge enhances vocabulary, allowing students to recognize word variations effectively, which in turn boosts reading skills. Inflectional suffixes play a fundamental role in language structure, morphology, and syntax [4]. Their significance is evident in various linguistic aspects, such as grammar, meaning, and language acquisition [29]. Regarding grammar and meaning, the inflectional suffixes contribute to grammatical relationships without altering the core meaning of words (e.g., tense, plurality, case). Language acquisition, on the other hand, is understanding how learners, especially second-language (L2) learners, can acquire and process inflectional suffixes to enhance teaching methodologies. Given these roles, conducting a review of existing studies is crucial. It is necessary to consolidate findings identify inflectional suffix patterns and address unresolved issues. Similarly, [2] highlighted the importance of second language learning in elementary schools. His research shows that exposing students to a second language fosters cognitive and social-emotional development. The absence of such programs creates a gap that schools should address, as early language learning positively impacts growth during this critical developmental stage.

The study showed the benefits and necessity of second language learning and teaching in elementary schools through research-based in-service presentations. Learning English as a foreign language can be challenging, especially as it often differs greatly from students' native languages. This complexity involves mastering not just the language but also a range of intricate components [36]. It provides evidence to assist administrations in supporting second language programs, highlighting cognitive and social-emotional development benefits. The goal was to expand second language learning, backed by research indicating improved student abilities. Understanding inflectional suffixes helps students comprehend texts by allowing them to infer context, understand word relationships, and decode unfamiliar words. It enables young writers to express ideas more accurately and effectively, improving communication with peers and teachers. Learning about these suffixes fosters critical thinking, enhancing overall cognitive development. Thus, the current study is guided by the research question, "How do inflectional affixes contribute to the development of students' grammar skills?"

Mastering these skills enables the formation of grammatically correct sentences, facilitating complex communication. Understanding inflections simplifies grammar learning, as they indicate features like tense and number, aiding vocabulary expansion. Additionally, learning inflections improve pronunciation, leading to better communication. This study provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature to contextualize and support the current research. The review delves into existing studies and scholarly works related to the research topic. The synthesis of this literature critically examines gaps, contradictions, and trends, leading to the identification of the research niche. This study sets out to explore the topic of learning suffixation, particularly verb suffixes (the past simple & past participle) regarding the various definitions and classifications by several linguists and researchers.

## METHOD

In this study, we conduct a narrative synthesis of the existing literature. Two common motivators for narrative analysis are the lack of relevant literature or an author's attachment to a piece of literature. A narrative review has as its main objective, to review the published information in detail and contribute to the general discussion on a topic available in the literature [27]. The review of studies included in this paper involves several steps. Several papers were analyzed based on the content analysis approach. These papers were collected from the Google Scholar database. Various keywords were utilized to elicit the articles. The keywords included Inflectional Affixes, Grammar Skills, Morphology and Syntax, Language Learning

## RESULTS

### The Role of Inflectional Suffixes in Language Structure and Word Form

Reference [17] asserts that language serves as a powerful means of expressing thoughts through words, symbols, sounds, and movements. Language connects words with meaning, and linguistics explores this relationship. Morphology, a branch of linguistics, studies the structure and classification of words, analyzing how morphemes combine to form new lexemes. For example, "talked" is a form of "talk," while "walks," "walked," and "walking" belong to "walk." Words are crucial for communication, and understanding their construction is vital in morphology, focusing on morphemes—the smallest units of meaning. A word can have one morpheme (e.g., "red") or multiple (e.g., "readiness"). Bound morphemes (like -ness, -ly, -ing, -s, -ed) cannot stand alone; for instance, "teachers" has three morphemes: teach-er-s.

In addition, [33] examined word formation, and noted that the word has the smallest morpheme. For example, the word "played" combines "play" and "-ed," indicating past tense. Understanding morphology is essential for learning English, affecting vocabulary and syntax [6]. Reference [14] found that plural (-s) and past tense (-ed) morphemes were the most common in writing essays, suggesting that studying them can enhance comprehension and improve vocabulary. Inflectional morphemes affect number and tense without changing word class or meaning. Derivational and inflectional morphemes are essential for word formation and meaning. Understanding inflectional suffixes, like 'ed' for past tense, helps students grasp grammatical features without changing a word's category [28].

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## Suffixation

A solid understanding of suffixes in English is crucial for learners, especially for formal evaluations. Students who can identify and use various word forms can rapidly enhance their vocabulary. Suffixes are essential for students to enhance their English skills, particularly in the early stages of learning. Mastering suffixation aids in effective communication, reducing grammatical errors that often lead to misunderstandings. Fewer mistakes can result in better grades and clearer expression. According to [5] affixation involves adding a prefix or suffix to a base word, which might change its class. For instance, "un-" in "unhappy" alters the meaning, while "-er" in "driver" changes the word's class. Reference [28] defines prefixes as attached to the beginning of a word, altering its meaning, while suffixes, added to the end, often modify its meaning, grammar, or change the word class, such as transforming "kind" into "kindness" with the suffix "-ness." Both processes, known as affixation, involve attaching morphemes to existing words. For example, adding '-s' to a noun forms its plural, while '-ed' turns a verb from present to past tense. Suffixes like -s, -ing, and -ed indicate grammatical functions such as third person singular, present participle, and past tense. A word can have multiple suffixes, as seen in "teachers" or "explanations." While prefixes are usually single, suffixes can be both derivational and inflectional. Unlike prefixes, which only change meaning without altering syntactic class, suffixes can do both, indicating their versatility in language.

According to [13], suffixes are classified as derivational or inflectional. A derivational suffix changes the part of speech, such as the suffix -er, which transforms the verb "speak" into the noun "speaker." Furthermore, [34] notes that derivation can occur through both prefixes and suffixes. Derivational morphemes are bound affixes that create new words and can alter meanings. For instance, the prefix "dis-" in "disagree" changes the positive meaning of "agree" to its opposite [21]. [22] states that inflectional suffixes produce alternative grammatical functions, such as tense or number, without altering the part of speech. For example, "play," "plays," "playing," and "played" are different forms of the same verb. These elements are known as morphemes.

A morpheme, as defined by [9], is the minimal grammatical unit of meaning in a language. For example, "tourists" contains three morphemes: "tour," "-ist-" (indicating a person who does something), and "-s" (indicating plural). According to [21] morphemes are classified as free, bound, and zero. Free morphemes can stand alone, while bound morphemes cannot and must attach to other units. Morphemes can also be categorized as root (stem), derivational, or inflectional. The root morpheme conveys the core meaning of a word. For example, "speak" is the root in "speakers" [4]. [18] also added that words are potentially complex units, they consist of even more basic units, named morphemes. A morpheme is the smallest unit of words and has a grammatical meaning. For example, lived, living, and lives can all be analyzed into the morphemes (live)+ (-ed), (-n), (-ing), and (-s), respectively. These four morphemes cannot be further divided into meaningful units and each occurs in many other words, such as cooked, sung, watching, and plays.

Reference [26] explains that when derivational and inflectional morphemes are removed, the remaining form is the root (e.g., "move" in "immovability"). While bases are forms to which affixes attach, not all bases are roots, although roots can be bases [7]. Moreover, [8] noted that words are complex units made up of morphemes, the smallest meaningful units. For instance, "lived," "living," and "lives" can be broken down into morphemes like (live) + (-ed), (-ing), and (-s). [10] discussed inflectional morphology, which examines how different forms of a word relate within a lexeme's paradigm. In specific, [11] defined a paradigm as the group of inflectional forms of a lexeme. Most English verbs have six forms; for example, the verb "walk" can be inflected as follows:

1. Past tense: He walked to school
2. 3rd singular present: He walks to school
3. Plain present: We walk to school
4. Plain form: He should walk
5. Gerund: He is walking to school

## 6. Past participle: He has walked to school

Reference [4] highlighted that inflection alters word forms. English includes various inflectional suffixes: for nouns, -s (possessive) and -es (plural); for verbs, -(e)d (past), -ing (present participle), -en (past participle), and -s (third-person singular); and for adjectives, -er (comparative) and -est (superlative). Inflection enables verbs to express tenses and aspects, as in "clean" becoming "cleans," "cleaned," or "cleaning."

Table I Verb Suffixes

Form	Stem	Present Third-Person Singular	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
Inflectional Suffixes		(-s3)	(-ing)	(-d)	(-d2)
Example	Play ring cut	plays rings cuts	Playing ringing cutting	Played rang cut	played rung cut

Nouns can change their form to express different cases, numbers, and genders. This process is called noun inflection. For instance, the noun "man" can be inflected as "men" for plural, "man's" for possessive, or "manhood" for derived noun.

Table II Noun Suffixes

Form	Stem	Plural	Possessive	Plural-Possessive
Inflectional Suffixes		(-s)	(-s)	(-s) + (-s)
Example	Man doctor	Men doctors	man's doctor's	men's doctors'

Adjectives change their form to express various degrees of comparison, which is known as adjective inflection. Take the word "good," for instance. It can be inflected as "better" to indicate the comparative degree or as "best" to indicate the superlative degree.

Table III Adjective Suffixes

Form	Stem	Comparative	Superlative
Inflectional Suffixes		(-er)	(-est)
Example	Large Hot Happy	Large hotter happier	Largest hottest happiest

[33] notes that pronoun inflection involves changes to indicate cases, persons, and numbers, such as "he" to "him" (object case) or "his" (possessive). Adverbs can also be intensified or compared, like "quickly" to "very quickly." Regular inflectional forms follow rules (e.g., "played," "walked"), while irregular forms include examples like "bought" and "sang." [4] identifies regular suffixes, and [16] mention irregular ones, including:

1. Alternative suffixes (e.g., "ox – oxen").
2. Consonant or vowel changes (e.g., "child – children").
3. Vowel changes only (e.g., "tooth – teeth").
4. No change (e.g., "sheep – sheep").

Fitria highlights two verb suffixes: the past tense (e.g., "talk – talked") and the past participle (e.g., "have done").

### How Inflectional Suffixes Contribute to Grammatical Categories Such as Tense

Inflectional suffixes play a crucial role in forming grammatical categories like past tense in languages. They modify base words to indicate different grammatical features and convey temporal or aspectual information. In English, the past simple tense describes a specific past action, while the past participle denotes a completed action that occurred before another past or present event. Understanding inflection helps learners enhance their communication skills. In other words, [3] highlighted difficulties foreign language learners face with tenses, particularly in writing narrative compositions at 42 state SMK in Jakarta. Her study identified common errors associated with the simple past tense and attributed these to learners' carelessness and their mother tongue's interference. Errors were categorized into the use and form of the simple past tense, with challenges noted in regular and irregular verbs, demonstrating ongoing issues learners face in mastering this aspect of grammar.

### Verb Inflection

Verbs denote action or a state of being and can be identified by their location in a sentence. Common suffixes are added to verbs to indicate whether the action occurred in the past or is happening in the present. Verbs have four inflectional forms which are listed below. According to [4], the verb paradigm is seen in Table I.

Reference [22] categorized verbs into five forms:

1. Base form: "They agreed to play with us."
2. -s form: "She plays with us."
3. -ed form: "she played with us."
4. -en form: "she has played with us."
5. -ing form: "she is playing with us."

These endings (-s, -ed, -ing) are known as inflections. As [11] noted, the key characteristic of verbs is their inflection, particularly the tense distinction between past and present. A preterite is a past tense indicated by inflection, unlike auxiliary verbs. It's important to distinguish between an inflectional form and its "shape," the latter referring to a word's spelling or pronunciation. The study considers preterite and past participle as separate forms; some verbs share the same shape (e.g., "play, played, played"), while others differ (e.g., "take, took, taken"). [9] identified four inflectional suffixes in English verbs: Third-person singular present tense (Z3), Past tense (D1), Past participle (D2), and Present participle (iN1).

D1 has three allomorphs: (t-d-id). Regular verbs (weak) like "learn" have identical past tense and past participle forms with the -ed pattern. In contrast, irregular verbs (strong), such as "eat," differ: past tense "ate" and past participle "eaten." Differentiating verbs by their morphological formation is essential; regular verbs follow a pattern, while irregular ones do not, complicating memorization.

For example, the irregular verb "go" has:

1. Base form: "she agreed to go with us."
2. -s form: "she goes with us."
3. -ed form: "she went with us."
4. -en form: "she has gone with us."
5. -ing form: "she is going with us."



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The focus here is on the past tense -ed and past participle -en forms:

1. -ed: past tense (e.g., played)
2. -en: past participle (e.g., eaten)

1) *Past Tense*: [30] note that the past tense indicates an action occurred before now, but it doesn't specify if the action was brief or extended; that's determined by adjuncts or the verb's meaning. Knowing a verb's base form (present tense) is essential [32]. [24] explains that the base form applies to all subjects except third-person singular (he, she, it), and the past form is created by adding -ed, used with all subjects. For example, "visited" applies to I/ you/ he/ she/ it/ we/ they visited.

According to [12], the suffix -ed or -d indicates the past tense in verbs. Regular verbs form the past tense by adding -ed or -d, while irregular verbs take different forms. This past tense morphology is well-researched, as it features both regular and irregular forms. In the same line, [31] noted that regular verbs, like "play-played," are generally easier to learn than irregular ones. However, learners may struggle with correct spelling when adding -ed. References (e.g. [35]-[23]) highlighted that the simple past tense denotes completed events. Errors can occur in both regular and irregular forms, with irregular verbs not adhering to the standard -ed addition.

[25] explained that the simple past tense for regular verbs is formed by adding -ed, as in "worked" from "to work." Verbs ending in 'e' only add 'd,' like "loved." Irregular verbs, such as "spoke" from "to speak," have unique past forms. The negative is formed with "did not" + infinitive (e.g., "he did not play"), and questions use "did" + subject + infinitive, e.g., "Did she work?"

The present study decisively supports the use of rules for forming past tense and past participle shapes. In contrast, [1] compellingly argues that both regular and irregular past tense forms are generated through analogy, demonstrating a single-route analogical mechanism. Their findings make it clear that children's acquisition of the English past tense does not rely on formal rules. They analyze overregularization errors, which point to two dominant theories: the dual-route model, suggesting these errors arise from applying a morphological rule (such as adding -ed), and the single-route model, which posits they result from analogy with stored examples like peel/peeled. The study firmly concludes that children are significantly more likely to regularize verbs that sound similar to existing regular ones. This evidence reinforces the idea that overregularization in young children (ages 3-4) is better accounted for by analogy rather than a rule-based approach.

2) *Past Participle*: The past participle of some verbs is formed by adding -ed to the base form, while irregular verbs may have unique alterations. For example, "choose" becomes "chosen" [4]. Regular verbs typically follow the -ed, -d, -t, -n, or -en pattern, but irregular verbs deviate from this rule, requiring each form to be learned individually. Misuse of these forms, like saying "teached" instead of "taught," can lead to grammatical errors. As noted by [34], past participles are created from both regular and irregular verbs. [15] emphasizes that when using a past participle, it should follow "have/has."

According to [28], the past participle is primarily used in two constructions: perfect and passive. The perfect construction, as in "Ahmed has flown from Libya," uses 'have' plus the past participle, while the passive construction, such as "The plane is being flown by an experienced pilot," combines a form of 'to be' with the past participle. [24] explains that the -ed form is generated by adding 'ed' to regular verbs, but irregular verbs have various forms like 'eaten' or 'stolen.' Learning a new language can be challenging due to cognitive differences that affect areas like listening, speaking, and writing. Many students may struggle with inflectional morphology in English, particularly its many irregular forms, which can lead to errors such as using a regular inflection for an irregular verb.

3) *Spelling Rules*: Not all types of words (verbs) in English end in -ed. Verbs have two categories: regular and irregular ones. There are regular past simple tense verbs and past participle verbs that usually have the same form as the past tense. Regular verbs, true to their name, adhere to a set pattern when spelling changes in their past tense and participle form. These verbs follow a straightforward rule of adding -ed to the base form, resulting in a predictable transformation. On the other hand, irregular verbs eschew predictability with unique alterations

that do not adhere to a specific formula. In this exploration, the researcher will journey through the landscape of regular and irregular spelling rules of verbs. She will unravel the rules of regular verbs, which offer a sense of order and consistency in conjugation. Simultaneously, the researcher will venture into irregular verbs, where the charm lies in their idiosyncrasies, adding depth and character to language.

The researcher hopes that by explaining this discussion, they will gain a clearer understanding of how these two contrasting categories shape the rich tapestry of language people use to communicate. English verb inflection is also known as conjugation. Regular verbs are composed of three parts: the base verb (present tense), the base verb plus -ed (simple past tense), and the base verb plus -ed (past participle). Following these principles, for example, the verb 'talk' (as in "I talk with my friend") becomes 'talked' in both the simple past tense and the past participle ("I talked with my friend", "I have talked with my friend"). While most verbs obey these conjugation rules, there are many words in the English language that do not. Because these verbs do not follow the norms for typical English verbs, their conjugation must be learnt separately. As a result, the researcher attempts to categorize them so that they are clearer and easier for the learner to grasp or memorize. When some words are suffixed, the spelling of the resultant word changes. Students should be taught the rules associated with various suffixes. As an example:

- The spelling of the suffix -ed varies depending on the base word.
- If it ends in a 'y', such as 'study', the 'y' is removed and -ied is added, 'studied'.
- If the last word is a short vowel followed by a consonant like stop, it is doubled before the -ed is added: stopped. The most specific rules are listed below.

Table IV Summary of Regular Verbs Spelling Rules

+ ED	+ D	C-V-C	CONSONANT + Y	+ KED
		+CONSONANT+ED	+ IED	
Jump	Save	Geg	Study	Mimic
Work	Live	Jog	Dry	Panic
Play	Love	Prefer	Cry	Frolic

Table V General Spelling Rules for Irregular Verbs

Base	Past Tense	Past Participle
Watch	Watched	Watched
Like	Liked	Liked
Cost	Cost	Cost
Cut	Cut	Cut
Bring	Brought	Brought
Teach	Taught	Taught
Go	Went	Gone

As is seen in Table V, the first column is the base form of the verb, the second is the past tense of the verb, and lastly, the past participle of the verb. In the two first verbs, the past tense and past participle are the same spelling, they both just add -ED to the past tense and past participle form. This is because these verbs are regular. When verbs are regular, they have the same spelling in both past tense and past participle using the -ed suffix. Notice the third and fourth verbs; they do not change their form in the three patterns; they have the same form in present, past, and past participle. Also, the fifth and sixth verbs do not add -ed because they are irregular. Likewise, the seventh and eighth verbs are irregular. The difference between the last two groups of verbs is that 'cost' and 'cut' have the same form in all patterns; 'bring' and 'teach' are the same past tense and past participle. These are verbs with one change. Whereas the last two, 'go' and 'begin', are three different patterns.

### **Examination of How Teaching Approaches Impact Inflectional Suffixes Learning**

Reference [20] suggests that utilizing learning strategies can help learners effectively manage their academic workload in a more structured, coherent, and prepared manner, resulting in increased productivity during study time. Additionally, instructor-provided socialization of learning strategies can have a positive impact on learners. By adopting appropriate learning approaches, students are allowed to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, preparing them to become competent and intelligent teachers in the future. The importance of using learning strategies was also emphasized. According to Kemp, learning strategies are essential activities that both teachers and students should engage in to achieve effective and efficient learning outcomes. Hence, teachers should collaborate with their students in order to accomplish the desired goals.

Another researcher [35] highlighted the importance of integrating grammar into relevant contexts that ESL learners can easily understand and relate to. They emphasized the use of language games as a highly effective strategy for teaching various language abilities. By incorporating engaging resources and using diverse approaches to conduct language games during lessons, educators can better meet the needs and interests of learners, especially when teaching grammar in context. Their work demonstrates the effectiveness of using language games in teaching grammar to ESL learners.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study investigated the inflectional affixes for the purpose of teaching and learning grammar by highlighting the benefits of utilizing inflectional affixes. The relating previous studies on the fluency, interest, and motivation of learners indicated that the lack of interest, fluency, and motivation among ESL learners can be attributed to the use of difficult, monotonous, and conventional grammar instruction methods. [22] referred that acquiring a new language presents challenges, particularly regarding cognitive differences, especially in the context of learning past participles among EFL learners. This study highlights the necessity of exposing learners to inflectional affixes in the context of grammar instruction. This trend was supported by [2] who emphasized the significance of second language acquisition in education. His research indicates that exposure to a second language enhances cognitive and socio-emotional development in students. Despite the fact that there have been discussions concerning the difficulties of employing inflection affixes, there have also been promising on the usefulness of learning that grammatical knowledge. For example, [32] showed that understanding inflectional suffixes helps students read texts by inferring context, understanding word relationships, and decoding unknown words. Additionally, ([5], [35]-[20] emphasises the importance of pedagogical activities, and reveals that mastering suffixation enhances communication efficacy and minimizes grammatical errors that can result in misunderstandings.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research demonstrates that inflectional affixes augment ESL learners' comprehension and acquisition of grammar by directly fostering their interest, fluency, and motivation in the learning process. Mastering grammar particularly inflectional affixes is essential for 21st-century students, as it demonstrates proficiency and facilitates effective communication. Likewise, mastery of grammar in context enhances confidence. Therefore, grammar should not be taught or learned in isolation, but through relevant approaches that allow ESL learners to easily relate to its application. Additionally, pedagogical elements, such as instructional approaches and feedback, significantly impact learning inflectional morphology. Interactive and contextual experiences enhance



understanding, while timely feedback corrects errors and reinforces correct usage. Factors like lesson sequencing and real-world examples contribute to successful learning.

## RECOMMENDATION

The study affirmed that students encounter difficulties with spelling when applying -ed to regular verbs. Thus, it is recommended that educators integrate morphological instruction to assist learners in identifying patterns in verb conjugation. Additionally, engaging in activities such as word segmentation, suffix recognition exercises, and spelling drills can enhance the accuracy of past tense and past participle formation. Regular verbs adhere to predictable rules, whereas irregular verbs necessitate memorization. Therefore, instruction should differentiate between these two categories as well as educators can utilise games as a way of their teaching.

Innovative teaching strategies, such as immersive communicative techniques, help learners apply inflected forms in practical contexts. Furthermore, technology-assisted methods provide immediate feedback, facilitating better internalization of norms. By aligning instructional strategies with pedagogical insights, educators can create engaging experiences that enhance the acquisition of inflectional morphology. Even though this study provides valuable information for the use of inflection affixes, there is still a need to conduct more empirical studies in terms of using inflection affixes in the context of EFL.

## Implication

According to the reviewed literature, the study identified several core implications regarding inflectional affixes impacting past tense and past participle formation in this context, especially in language learning and teaching.

### Implications for Teaching Grammar

Since the past tense formation is made up of regular (-ed) and irregular forms of verbs, teachers should be mindful of providing explicit instruction for each category. Also, errors in spelling when adding -ed suggest the use of activities helping to improve students' phonological awareness in terms of applying past tense suffixes accurately.

### Implications for Second Language Acquisition SLA

It also shows the difficulty for non-native speakers to differentiate how to form regular from irregular past tense. As overregularization ("tached" instead of "taught") happens due to analogy, teachers should utilize contrastive analysis to strengthen the proper use of the past tense and past participle.

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